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THE DESIRES OF THE SELF-CONSCIOUS

THAT the capacity for morality depends upon self-consciousness has, perhaps, come to be enough of a truism to need no emphasizing. The fabric of ordinary moral experience is obviously made up of mental processes and mental contents which are simply special cases or special consequences of the power of self-representation; and only that conduct is treated as the subject of moral predicates which is ascribed to a conscious agent not constitutionally incapable of such things as self-criticism, of that self-diremption implied in the contrast between actual and ideal, or possible, attainment, of a feeling of self-origination of acts, of a contrast between self and other. Even the egoistic hedonist's judgments of expediency imply the ability to form a more or less definite notion of a perduring self, from their common reference to the satisfaction of which all the practical prescriptions which he lays down get their rational justification. The importance of the fact of human self-consciousness for ethics is more expressly insisted upon by some schools of moralists—for example, by Green and his followers,—while only casually taken for granted by others; but in some fashion or other it is by this time pretty generally recognized. Yet (but for a few praiseworthy exceptions) one does not find (so far as my reading goes) either ethical theorists or psychologists treating the subject in a way which at all matches either its fundamental significance in relation both to the moral and to the logical judgment, or its psychological complexity. One may still read recent and scholarly studies of the evolution of morality in which no express reference is made to the circumstance that it is self-consciousness that is the *conditio sine qua non* of the moral consciousness, and no account is given of the way in which and the stages through which this power developed and interacted with the other factors in human evolution.¹

¹ This inadequacy—which amounts to an ignoring of the essence of their problem—marks, for example, such well-known and important books as Sutherland's 'Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct,' Wundt's 'Facts of the Moral Life' and Westermarck's newly-published 'Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas,' Vol. I. None of these, from the nature of their themes, can

One may likewise read analyses, otherwise highly competent, of the moral judgment and the moral emotions which entirely neglect to attack directly and systematically what one might naturally take to be their first task—the inquiry into the nature, the diverse meanings, the relations, of the consciousness of self, and especially into the way in which desire and volition are affected by its presence among human faculties. For if a psychology of the moral consciousness is the proper beginning of all profitable ethical theory, the psychological question first of all calling for consideration under that head would seem to be: How does self-consciousness affect or transform desire and impulse? What new cravings, desires, interests are characteristic of the fully self-conscious animal, in contrast with animals in whose experience this type of consciousness has not yet appeared; and what is the relation of those desires and interests to moral conduct?

I. One answer to this question is, indeed, common and familiar enough; it is that the supervention of self-consciousness makes man's choices (so far as they are really affected by it) necessarily egoistic. It was this conclusion that was taken for granted by Mr. Kidd in his once much-discussed book on 'Social Evolution.' The lower animals, it is said, though they can't properly be called unselfish, at all events have instincts (the result of natural selection) which impel them to sacrifice themselves as individual organisms in the interest of the perpetuation of the species; and these instincts they obey as blindly as any others. But man, in so far as he acts with the light of reason and with full consciousness of the distinction between himself and his interests and other selves and their interests, must necessarily be controlled by self-referring motives; though fortunately the old instincts or certain suprarational sanctions are frequently strong enough to limit or overcome this rational egoism. This theory of the necessity of self-reference—of control by some form of self-interest—in all fully self-conscious volition, is likewise assumed by the doctrine of Green and the English 'self-realizationists' in ethics, though they, of course, ingeniously contrive to avoid bringing this egoism into any conflict with 'altruism'; rational choice, for Green, not simply ought to, but actually and necessarily does, aim always at 'the abiding satisfaction of a permanent self.' This view I take to express a very inadequate consideration of the workings of self-consciousness—as I shall try to show; but altogether avoid reference to phenomena that are obviously phases of self-consciousness; but it is rather astonishing to see how casual most of these references are, and how little these writers are sensible of any obligation to deal directly and systematically with that peculiarity which, psychologically speaking, constitutes the generic differentia of the human animal and the essential 'formal' element in morality.

I can not agree with those who, going to the other extreme, would not admit that it imperfectly expresses one of the real results of self-consciousness in relation to volition. The appearance of that curious ejective construct called 'self' among the objects of thought does bring with it certain entirely new and distinctive interests and appetencies. That the materials for that construct are largely borrowed materials, and not really unique or original, Baldwin has shown us; that the content of the objectified self, of 'the me and the mine,' is in the highest degree indefinite, changeable and elusive—the artificial result of selective abstraction and varying subjective interest—James and others have shown. But it remains true that we have a conception of the self as a sum of interests, as a possessor of potential goods, distinct from the interests and the goods of other selves, through its contrast with which the 'me' acquires definition and meaning; and that these interests and goods of 'number one' tend to have a peculiar interestingness, a special power of fixating attention and arousing desire in the actual 'subjective self' of our successive moments of consciousness,² in a way that goes beyond, and is distinct from, their merely direct appeal to un-self-conscious, instinctive responses. James has observed that 'there is no reason to suppose that self-love is primarily, or secondarily, or ever, love for one's mere principle of conscious identity.' But if this means that the mere applicability of the first personal pronoun to the conceived good or satisfaction of a self does not add, and add materially, to the interestingness of that conceived good for the average man, the observation seems to contradict facts of common experience. When thinking of the self under this form of self-consciousness,— *i. e.*, when thinking of it as a sum of interests or a recipient of goods—men surely often desire certain ends, not because they would otherwise feel any instinctive craving for them, but because those ends are subsumed under the abstract class 'interests of self.' How abstract in meaning this 'mine' may become without ceasing to be effective (however illogically) as an awakener of especial subjective interest and desire may be seen if one asks in what sense the Buddhist or Hindu, in that new incarnation for the sake of which he sacrifices present goods, will be the same self. Yet he undoubtedly

² It is assumed throughout, as evident and familiar, that the active and subjective self, which involves essentially the 'attitudes' and the tendencies of attention of any given moment of consciousness, is distinguished from that abstract artefact, the objectified self, or 'me.' The point of the present paper is that the conceived interests of the objectified self are, indeed, subjectively interesting in a peculiar degree; but that in any self-representing agent the subjective interest in the objectified self as an object of approbation or disapprobation, as a subject of favorable or unfavorable predicates, is organically more fundamental, and more efficacious, than the interest in the objectified self conceived as the possessor of goods.

is (though one may reasonably ask why he should be) more solicitous about that future self which will have no memory continuous with his present stream of consciousness than he is about the well-being of other, contemporaneous selves, whose consciousness is no more completely discontinuous with his. And what may be true in this extreme case is very frequently true in ordinary cases. That it is so, however, is, I suspect, largely due to the influence of one or another form of the second general type of desire connected with the representation of self, to which I next turn. The first type would, indeed, afford material for much psychological analysis; but what I want to insist on is the fact that this sort is much less important than—and when the two come into opposition, is naturally subordinate to—quite another sort of desire with respect to the represented self.

II. The objectified 'me' no sooner emerges among the objects of thought, of frequent mental reference, than there emerges with it what may be called the 'approbative' type of interest. This appears in two familiar forms, the precise nature of which, however, needs to be carefully noted.

1. The self, as Baldwin has suggested, apparently becomes a self only in so far as it is thought, not only as contrasted as to its content with others, but also as being *for* others. At all events, whatever be the genetic psychology of the matter, in fully developed self-consciousness the self is conceived as being an object for the thought of other selves just as it is known to be (perhaps one ought to say 'remembered to have been') an object for the thought of the subjective self of certain moments of consciousness. As an object in the thought of others, it is conceived as causing certain attitudes, giving rise to certain judgments, favorable or unfavorable, approving, disapproving or indifferent, on the part of those others, just as they constantly give rise to like judgments and attitudes on its part. And, as every one knows, the self-conscious animal has a peculiarly lively interest in these attitudes, peculiarly strong desires with respect to these judgments. The idea that his objectified self cuts an ill figure as an object for those other selves is, for some reason, a painful idea; the thought of looming as a large, impressive, admired, or beloved object in those eyes is correspondingly attractive and desire-provoking. Upon this, the ordinary 'approbateness,' I do not need here to say much, though I think there is more to be said about it than has always been recognized. It is commonly treated as a rather accidental and morbid element in human nature, a desire which the moralist should reprobate in passing, but from which he can learn little; though Adam Smith once found in it sufficiently pregnant intimations both of some of the elements in the

nature of the good and of some of the deeper workings of human motive. All that it is needful to remark about this state of mind in the present connection is that what awakens interest and desire in the subjective or representing self of the moment is in this case not the representation of the objectified self as realizing any interests, fulfilling any of *its* desires, enjoying any satisfaction—but rather the representation of that self as *being* something at the moment of action or even at the moment of choice, as standing in a certain light, as the subject of certain predicates, such as ‘admired,’ ‘approved,’ ‘respected,’ or merely ‘not disapproved.’ The representation of the self in this manner is an agreeable representation, and therefore the action that is a part of that representation and the condition precedent to the bestowal of approbation, is chosen. But it is not at all necessary that the objectified self should itself be supposed to be the possessor or conscious experiencer of any future good resulting from this choice; in the classic example of action directed to the assuring of posthumous fame or to the saving of one’s ‘honor’ from stain, it is palpable that the conceived ‘self’ in question gets no satisfaction of its own out of the business. The desire involved is not the desire that the objectified self shall *get* anything in the future; it is due entirely to the present interestingness of the idea of the self as *being*, at the conceived moment of action, *describable in certain terms* implying certain attitudes on the part of other selves. And because it has this character, ‘approbateness’ belongs in the same general class of desires as the more significant type next to be considered—to the development of which in the mental growth of the individual it is apparently a preliminary stage.

2. The human individual, through the same process in which he acquires the idea of his self and of the alter contrasted with it, at the same time learns to take attitudes of approval or disapproval towards the characteristics or the acts of all selves, whether of *ego* or *alter*. How he learns this, and why he should be so constituted as to be forever approving or disapproving, we can not here stop to inquire; it is enough to note the obvious fact. A self, as actually thought about, is usually thought, and is always potentially thought, as the proper logical subject of some kind of descriptive adjectives or epithets which carry with them favorable or unfavorable connotations. It results from this that self number one—the ‘me’—may be conceived by the subjective consciousness of any given moment as belonging in the class of selves habitually approved or of those habitually disapproved, as being, in other words, approvable or disapprovable, as the legitimate subject of good or of bad predicates. And the formula for the kind of desire involved in this mode of self-representation is this: the representation of the objectified self as

possessing characters or exhibiting actions which, at the moment of the representation, are conceived as disapprovable (which, in general, are those which would be disapproved in any other self under like circumstances), is a painful representation; and the actions and characters involved correspondingly tend to be inhibited. Any representation of the ejective self (conceived as agent) in which it possesses qualities that the subjective ego does not, in the act of representing them, admire or respect, is an 'unpleasant idea'; and is therefore an idea which, in so far as it involves action, does not get attended to in such a manner as to determine choice in favor of that action.³

All this seems simple and familiar enough; yet I can not but think that two fundamentally significant facts about this type of self-conscious desire have been too often neglected. For, in the first place, if it be admitted that this kind of desire exists and plays a great part in the actual determination of human choices, it follows that not merely the hedonist's, but also the 'self-realizationist's' theory of a necessary reference in self-conscious volition to the satisfaction of the self, is wholly unfounded. The only self that must be satisfied in order that volition shall be possible is the subjective self, the active and unrepresented state of consciousness of the moment, with its actual tendencies of interest and attention; and the representation of the objectified self which (at least very commonly) so satisfies the subjective self is one in which it is conceived, not at all as a sum of interests, but as (logical) subject of approbational predicates. Here, as before, we have a desire, not that the self shall hereafter get or attain or enjoy something, but that, in action, it shall *be* something; and this desire is manifestly capable of controlling volition in our most completely self-conscious moments. How constantly controlling a motive it is in every man's experience any moderately subtle analysis not merely of one's own mental movements for the past hour or day, but of what is implied in any conversation, especially upon a moral issue, between any group of persons, will, I think, make evident. What chiefly influences deliberate human action is not the will for life or for pleasure or for power (except in so far as these are involved in the other), but the will for the good predicate for one's objectified self. The soldier can not tolerate the thought of himself as a 'coward,' therefore he flings himself into the imminent, deadly breach; the practical man may sacri-

³ Sutherland touches upon this under the head of 'Self-respect' in 'Origin and Growth of the Moral Instinct,' chap. XVI. But he represents this motive as controlling conduct through a fear of the *future* self-reproaches which would follow a breach of self-respect (II., pp. 63, 72). By thus misdating the influence of self-respect, Sutherland misses the essential point of the situation.

fice himself and others to his ambitious purposes, but he will not permit himself to 'act like a fool'; the philosopher will give up a cherished belief or a favorite practise when he comes to think of himself as 'irrational' or 'self-contradictory' in his adherence to it; and the poet who, like Walt Whitman, rather makes it a point of glory to contradict himself, still does so because 'consistency is the bugbear of small minds' and he will not think of himself as a small mind or as afraid of any bugbear. The chief end of man, it would appear, is an adjective; the ruling passion of the self-conscious animal is the pursuit of the good predicate for his acting self—the pursuit, not, indeed, of 'praise' (in the terminology of Adam Smith), but of 'praiseworthiness.'

Now much of this will probably appear strained and offensive to some; they will say that, for their part, they do not find themselves greatly concerned about the adjectives applicable—even objectively and intrinsically applicable—to their selves *in action*, that what they chiefly care about is that the ends of their action shall be such as, when realized, possess objective value. They may even urge that the former solicitude, in contrast with the latter, is the characteristic rather of the prig than of the average, normal, unpretending moral man. Such an objection is instructive because it is palpably self-refuting. To feel offended at the idea that mankind (including oneself) is chiefly actuated by the feeling of aversion from, or attraction to, certain adjectives of the self conceived as agent, is to betray the fact that one is, at the moment, quite powerfully actuated by that feeling. To maintain that only an outlooking interest in the worth of the ends of one's action is a truly moral attitude, is really to say that one regards the adjectival qualities of the self expressed through action as of more primary moral consequence than the ends of action. And if the prig is one who cares chiefly about the attributes of excellence found in the self-represented picture of his 'me,' a man is never more clearly a prig than when protesting that he is, and will be, none. But the real peculiarity of the priggish type of moral agent lies, of course, not in his being more greatly influenced by such self-representation of the qualities predicable of the 'me,' but in his tendency to be moved rather by the attractiveness of pictures of himself as positively admirable than by a spirited aversion from pictures of himself as negatively falling short of an ideal, as the potential subject of bad predicates. It is, on the whole, this negative form of the desire in question that seemingly constitutes the more usual (and one may add, the more healthy) type of moral motive in the greater part of mankind. Yet in any case the difference can only be one of degree; in any man there can hardly be lacking either the

desire for a given action arising from the representation of the self as therein approvable, or the aversion from other sorts of action arising from the representation of the self as therein disapprovable. In the one mode or the other, every man who acts with conscious and purposive morality is and must be a *poseur*—before himself; though it is possible to avoid being a *poseur* before other people. And he who disclaims this character does not possess it the less for being self-deceived.

We have not yet, however, seen the full significance of this species of self-conscious desire. It is not merely a highly important and deeply influential motive in human conduct; it is, in reality, the motive which can be shown to lie behind all others in the volition of self-conscious agents, and to be that which is necessarily presupposed in every relevant application of the verb 'ought' to acts of will. It is the thing that makes criticism of the ends which different men may set before themselves possible; there can be no such thing as pertinent discussion upon moral matters between two or more persons, where responsiveness to this desire is not tacitly assumed to lie within the bosoms of the parties to the discussion. It has, indeed, been commonly assumed by the 'teleological' sort of moralists that you could intelligibly discuss the 'worth' of ends, of conceived future situations, and persuade a man that he 'ought' to choose the end having the greater intrinsic worth at the conceived future moment. But this clearly is logically absurd and psychologically impossible. A future situation, or any element in that situation, can be an 'end' for my will only when I desire it; and always I either desire it or do not desire it. Once, indeed, it was the fashion in teleological ethics to suppose that all men necessarily desired some large, general end, such as their own happiness, or the greatest good of the greatest number, or their own self-realization; the business of the moralist was then merely to show men more fully the constituents of and the means to this predetermined general end; and his 'ought' could only mean: since you desire this end you by implication desire these means, and if you would act consistently [even here there is an invocation of interest in the predicates of the acting self] you ought to employ them. But I suppose that the theory that we first of all desire some general and abstract good is now sufficiently exploded. It appears to be generally admitted that a man primarily and ordinarily desires simply those concrete and specific future situations which present themselves to his imagination as interesting and desirable and alluring; *e. g.*, some particular pleasure, or the social standing of his children after his death, or fame, or an election to the Presidency, or the triumph of socialism, or revenge upon his

enemies, or the glory of God. And, I say, a man either desires any one of these things, or he does not; and if he does, it is meaningless—so long as you regard the will as being merely bent upon future goods resulting from action, and so long as you differ from him merely as to the value of given ends—to come to him and tell him he ‘ought’ to desire those ends. You may, indeed, produce some effect upon his mind by getting him to see that, by virtue of known relations of cause and effect, the supposed future situation will contain elements which he had overlooked, and which he does not really desire; or you may stimulate a competing desire by bringing some other and still more alluring future situation before his mind, or by any one of the hundred modes of social suggestion. But all this has nothing to do with the ‘ought’; it is merely a process of testing designed to make him see clearly what he most *does* desire. And if, when he has fully apprehended all the practical implications of the imagined future situation, he still holds to his desire for it, you have no means of proving to him that some other end (merely as end) which he does not want is for him a more valuable end. For ends surely can not be treated in abstraction from *de facto* desire. And thus *de facto* desire will so far have the last word; and no ‘ought’ will have anything to say against it. When, in short, you take account of no aspect of volition except that in which it appears as a means to the realization of goods, there is no going behind the returns as they are eventually reported by actual preponderant desire. *De finibus*, one may accurately say from this point of view, *non disputandum est*.

But what really gives the ‘ought’ relevancy to this mental situation, and gives to *it* the last word in the discussion, is the fact that the self-conscious agent not only chooses ends, but also contemplates himself as in the act of choosing and of realizing them; and that he has two kinds of desires: that he is not merely a desirer of valuable goods to be attained through his action, but also a desirer of approvable qualities of the self to be manifested *in* his action. The idea of ought, then, as applied to volitional choices, *gets its meaning entirely from the contrast between these two types of human desire*. Your desirer of wrong ends may want those ends most intensely; but he may at the same time not at all like the picture of himself as a chooser of them; he may be in the highest degree repelled by the predicates or adjectives which habit or a sense of consistency compels him to recognize as applicable to the self when it acts in the manner proposed. And his admission, to which you may bring him, that he ‘ought not’ to choose the end in question, merely expresses his sense of the incompatibility of these two desires, the necessity of inhibiting the former if he is to satisfy the latter—if he is to be, what it

is humanly impossible for him not to want to be, a self upon whose representation as it acts he can now look without loathing or contempt. Were there no such discrepancy between two types of desire, generically different by the nature and the date of the objects to which they refer, no man could ever have felt an 'ought' within himself with respect to his own purposes and choices; and the 'oughts' that outsiders might hurl at him would have no sort of logical grip upon him. To sum up this point, then, there are only two fundamentally distinct forms of subjective interest that determine deliberate choice: (a) the direct or spontaneous interest in a conceived future situation that may result from one's action; (b) interest in having the self *in* action the subject of approved predicates. The former is not strictly ethical at all, since there is in it no means of effectually appealing from the facts of desire to any 'ought.' As soon as moral discussion arises as to what end *should* be chosen, or as to what a rational object of desire is, the implicit appeal is always to this second kind of interest, that concerning the predicates of the self conceived as chooser or doer. This unconscious appeal betrays itself constantly in the dialectical procedure of teleological ethical theorists. Thus that usually clear and consistent kind of teleological moralist, the egoistic hedonist, when he endeavors to persuade other men to subordinate present gratifications (which they really want) to remote future satisfactions (which they don't really want), or when he dissuades them from absolute self-sacrifice for any impersonal end (even though that end seem to them the most interesting and important thing in the universe), is not really appealing to their desire for happiness; he is playing upon their desire not to be fools, self-condemned as weak or irrational in their behavior. This comes out particularly amusingly in the speeches of Callicles in the 'Gorgias'; that emancipated young gentleman supposes himself to be setting aside all restraint upon the free outreaching of desire after its object; but he is obviously doing so only from a painful sense of obligation to be truly and fully emancipated. The rejector of all objective standards in the same breath seeks to persuade Socrates that he, too, *ought* to reject the standards to which he happens to be subjectively attached, on the ground that such attachment is foolish and irrational. So, again, the self-realizationist seems to me to be impressed by his particular kind of ideal, not because self-realization would be a 'good' in the sense of finally satisfying the will, but because a fully realized self is an admirable and gratifying sort of potential self to contemplate. Every ethical teleologist who condemns an end as an irrational object of pursuit is really characterizing, not the end merely as such, but the quasi-esthetic qualities of any self which should choose that end; for an

end can not be irrational, but a self may be. And the characterization is morally pertinent and effective because men are so built as to be solicitous about the quasi-esthetic qualities of their objectified selves.

It is, I believe, possible to go still farther, and show that this solicitude is not only the ground of the possibility of the ought-consciousness, but also necessarily the determinant of every fully self-conscious choice; that when man is once caught up into this situation where his prospectively acting self stands clearly before him, he can not let it go until he blesses it—until, that is, he has contrived somehow not to be wholly dissatisfied in that self-representation. The desire under consideration appears to be the Brahma of the moral consciousness; and it may well say to the moralists who neglect it:

“They reckon ill who leave me out,
When me they fly, I am the wings.”

We shall not have the right starting-point in ethics until we recognize that all rational and self-conscious choice in man is *not* (in the language of the schoolmen) made *sub specie boni*, but rather *sub specie honesti*.

But upon this last-mentioned point I may not, in this rough, preliminary paper, amplify; nor is it possible to discuss the further questions that obviously suggest themselves; *e. g.*, how the teleological and the approbational kinds of desire are to be brought to common terms, and how the diversities of the latter, and its apparent arbitrariness, are to be reduced to a coherent and verifiable body of moral judgments. But I do not wish to conceal my feeling of the significance even of the ill-formulated *aperçus* here suggested. If they are true at all, they have a somewhat fundamental methodological significance for ethical theory; for they purport to render obsolete a conception of the working and motivation of the self-conscious will which, in one form or another, has powerfully influenced much of the most critical and important ethical reflection, and has constituted the essence of the psychological part of all teleological moral doctrine. They indicate that the rational agent is not primarily a chooser of ends at all, but a chooser (or avoider) of personal attributes or adjectives; that all ethical dialectic necessarily presupposes and appeals to such an interest in the predicates of the represented self; and that the notion ‘ought’ has no pertinency whatever to ends, except in so far as the choice of some end is conceived as the ground of the application of some adjective by the self to the self.

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